



News Release

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Warriors participate in underwater therapy

By Ed Drohan

Europe Regional Medical Command Public Affairs

HEIDELBERG, Germany – Staying underwater for long periods of time isn't something that comes naturally to most people. Add to that the anxiety or panic issues that are sometimes symptoms of post traumatic stress and scuba diving can be downright intimidating.

That's not how the Warrior Transition Battalion-Europe and the Wounded Warrior Project look at it, though. To them, helping Warriors in Transition find the strength to push past those issues – many of which are combat stress related – is a form of underwater therapy.

“They are reminded to trust their equipment and practice controlled breathing, and from there we connect the dots,” said WTB-E Social Worker Eileen Pawloski. “We show them that if they can do this, if they can learn to control their breathing scuba diving they can control their breathing during a panic attack. If they can confront their fear underwater, they can confront fear in a large crowd for example.”

The scuba class took place at Hambachtal Holiday Resort northwest of Baumholder, Germany, and was one part of the WWP's Project Odyssey. Named after Homer's epic poem about overcoming adversity and finding the way home, Project Odyssey seeks to help Soldiers overcome combat stress through outdoor activities shepherded by project staff and trained counselors. Or, as the WWP web site puts it, “Using nature and recreation to heal.”

For three days Warriors in Transition participated in a high ropes course, canoeing, kayaking, hiking and other outdoor activities, but it was the diving event at the resort's pool that was a highlight – if a somewhat anxious one – for most.

Staff Sgt. Joseph Walker, a Warrior in Transition with the WTB-E's platoon in Baumholder, said getting in the equipment and going underwater wasn't the easiest thing in the world for him.

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“It was a definite no-go...not happening...at first,” Walker said. “I have a problem with enclosed spaces coming from being rolled over in a Bradley and stuck for a while. I was anxious, real nervous and not very trusting at first.”

Eventually, walker said he became more aware of what was comfortable for him.

“Now, as soon as I’m under I’m a little more comfortable,” he said.

WTB-E has been participating in Project Odyssey for more than a year now, Pawloski said, with 10 transitioning Warriors able to take part in each session. Pawloski said she usually has quite a few volunteers from the battalion’s three companies for each session, but that wasn’t always the case.

“The first time we did this in June 2011 there was a lot of hesitation” on the part of the Warriors, Pawloski said. “It was hard to get them sold on trying it out. By the end of the first one they were totally turned around.”

Word of mouth has taken it from there so that now the social worker has no problem filling slots for the sessions.

“It thrills me a lot,” she said. “I’m a firm believer that talk therapy and medication management are important, but programs like Project Odyssey enhance their treatment by teaching them to use coping techniques in their environment.”

WTB-E provides mission command and administrative support to Soldiers requiring complex care due to injury or illness. Staff members co-ordinate and synchronize care, treatment, and services and promote readiness for the Soldier and their Family to transition back to the force or civilian life. Headquartered in Heidelberg, the battalion has companies in Kaiserslautern, Schweinfurt and Vilseck, and platoons at Baumholder, Wiesbaden, Heidelberg, Stuttgart, Bamberg, and Illesheim in Germany, and at Vincenza, Italy.

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Cutline (Photo by Staff Sgt. Michael Mattice):

WTB-E Scuba: Warriors in Transition from Warrior Transition Battalion-Europe participate in scuba diving at the Hambachtal Holiday Resort as part of the Wounded Warrior Project’s Project Odyssey.